

Social Service Human Relations Board

Minutes of the Regular Meeting, Thursday, May 22, 2008

1. CALL TO ORDER and ROLL CALL: President Wasko called the meeting to order at 7:35 p.m. Present were President Wasko, Vice President Chen, Members Nielsen, Villareal, and Soglin. Member James was absent. Staff: Jones.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES: The minutes from April 24, 2008 were approved with recommended edits. M/S Nielsen, Villareal all other members agreed except Member Franz abstained.

3-A. DISCUSSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS PROTOCOL:

Wasko—During our last meeting we generated a list of discussion items for future meetings. One issue identified for discussion was human rights. As the Sister City relationship with China grows there are many human rights issues that arise. We've heard a lot about Tibet during the torch run, however, there are other issues as well. On the east coast, you see demonstrators in the streets protesting China's treatment of their citizens. It took me a long time to get behind the Sister City work group because of the complexities of human rights in China. Now, I see the workgroup as a way to build understanding and I ask "how will we teach them"?

As a Board, we spend a lot of time talking about social services. This agenda item is an opportunity to have a discussion about the other part of our work and to have a discussion about what it means to be a human relations board. What is our role in human rights? What action, if any, do we want to refer to Sister City Workgroup, or do we want to make a recommendation to the City Council? This is a philosophical discussion about what we are committed to in the human relations and human rights part of our work.

Franz – Before we look at others, what about us? The world sees us as violators. If we are not willing to say country is totally screwed up in reaction to 9/11, we are being hypocritical to point out China's violations.

Chen – When I was in China they seemed to know more about the United States' civil violations than we do. This is not a perfect world, but we can bring awareness. Our capacity as city committee does not allow to supervise the human rights policies of China. We can bring this up to the delegation and let them decide for themselves. Bringing awareness is our limit.

Nielsen – I'm glad we are having this important discussion. We are in a public building on record, its exciting to bring these questions out our home and into government. I'm reviewing the UN Declaration on Human Rights, and I'm seeing its list of articles as an ideal that we're not meeting ourselves. I think we could talk about what we are working on and share our struggles and ideals rather than setting ourselves up as the teachers. Setting these ideals is something we're aspiring to and discussion points of what we're trying to get to.

Villareal – I agree with Franz that what we should work as a community to ensure that we adhere to the Human Rights charter. Yet within context of our purpose as a Board, I don't know how influential we can be. I think that bringing this conversation to a more local level programmatically and discussing what can we do in Alameda becomes more of our focal point and more realistic. I need to frame this in a more actionable perspective.

Franz – We need to remember that the people we interact with in Wuxi have no more power than we have to change their country's stance in relationship to human rights. We say 'its not me', well 'its not them' either.

Soglin – To the extent we want to make a public statement, I think its not to another government, but rather to Alamedans. I think the message to Alamedans is that we don't agree with everything China does in relation to human rights, just as we don't agree with any actions our government may take to violate human rights. I agree with Henry that there are enough human right violations and social service issues to work with to keep us busy. We need to choose where we can have the most impact.

Nielsen – I wonder if our role as government through Alamedans Together Against Hate (ATAH) is the way to approach this, focused on compassion, with actions for purpose of awareness and education.

Franz – If we have concerns about others we must at the same time name concerns about ourselves. For example, ATAH assumes hate in Alameda and we can't take hate out of the name because we know its real.

Chen – We are lucky to have our human rights protected, each one of 250 countries, is being protected.

Franz – Our rights are not being protected under the Patriot Act you could disappear, you are just lucky it hasn't happened. We are a democracy but we are a capitalistic country for power. If you want to find power, look for money. Elections are bought and sold.

Nielsen – We are far from perfect, but when I think of our actions, so much of our work through ATAH and Assessment and Awareness workgroups has been focused on building compassion and understanding events at the forums hosted with the College of Alameda and the "In the Mix" mixed race conference. There are initiatives are part of the fabric of our community and the city supports enable us to prepare them the best they can. As a next step, I can see giving fact sheets to City Council that highlights each of the areas of the UN Human Rights Charter and how our initiatives address each of the areas. Also, there are organizations that quantify social response for businesses. I wonder if we could use the models for any business partnership we make. The expectation is out there....

Soglin – In our dealings with the China delegation, I think a conversation about human rights should come more organically. We could say this is what we do, rather than saying this is what you should do.

Franz – China is an emerging nation. It has taken a long time to recognize African Americans as human beings and it has only been 50 years since the Japanese internment.

Soglin – Less for same sex marriage.

Chen – is this something we abide by, each of the articles in the Human Rights statement?

Wasko – It is more a guide, a dream or aspiration.

Soglin - International law has very little impact in this area.

Wasko – Everyone of us comes to this meeting once a month, there has to be something we see as a possibility. I agree with Cathy about baby steps. We've co sponsored the Season for Non Violence, the immigration forum with the League of Women Voters, the forums on racial profiling and cultural history with the College of Alameda. The fact that ATAH exists as well says that we believe rights should be protected; are there ways that we want to shout louder?

Franz – Some people you will never reach, and some you will reach when you talk in moderation. I think you lead by example, and that it has to be a conversation. You can raise the bar so much that people in gray area see you as adversaries. Have to be able to maintain the dialogue.

Chen – We can address human relations issue. For example, our citywide survey took 1-2 mins in a Council meeting because of connection with sister cities. We could focus on it more.

Nielsen – I believe in having a loud voice when an incident arises; other than that I think education and awareness is our role.

Franz – A few years ago there was a hate crime in Alameda. Right after this happened, I was part of the group protesting outside City Hall saying there was No Room for Hate in Alameda. But, the group chant changed to down with the police. That's not something I agreed with, but when you are in a crowd it looks like you are part of that idea. When reacting, you must be very careful because the sentiment of the crowd can change fast into something you don't agree with and don't have control over.

Soglin - I had a similar experience at a protest in Washington DC, when the media used my photograph and misrepresented what I stood for.

Villareal – There was a recent issue in alameda when a gay couple was verbally harassed and didn't think police had investigated the matter sufficiently. If sufficient interest is there, ATAH might take up the issue in an upcoming forum. At what point do we decide it's a significant enough issue to have a town hall meeting?

Wasko – We've done letters to editors, forums, and have many options available to us. That's the kind of watchfulness that we are called to do. With the China visit, we may have more opportunities for public statement.

Soglin – The Mayor or Council may receive questions about why we are talking about international human rights, and I think its important to have a response.

Chen – What does sister city think about this?

Villareal – to Wasko's, point to make a statement: I suggest something like “these are some of the actions we have taken as a board to make more accepting community, thereby attempting to strive towards the Human Rights articles that attempt to strive to make our community attain and protect the human rights of all.

Franz – I move adopt the UN Declaration of Human Rights as a guide for our action and for those elsewhere. M/S Franz, Nielsen and unanimous.

Wasko -- We need to start Council's thinking and raise awareness about human relations. On matters related to what Henry raised, we need to feel confident bringing up watch dog issues that might not seem big enough. Maybe start planting some seeds. M/S Franz, Nielsen and unanimous.

3-A. WORKGROUP STATUS REPORTS:

Alamedans Together Against Hate – Member Villareal reported that the forum on May 5th was a round table type set-up and was a productive dialog. The high school student was very proactive. He further mentioned that ATAH may hold another roundtable to focus on issues of harassment in the GLBT community. He mentioned that he and his partner heard anti gay comments once in a while when people drove by their gay pride sign, but that they feel more welcome than not on the Island. Wasko – Maybe police can explain threshold for defining hate crime, what is a hate crime? Soglin - I agree, for example there is a gray area as to what gives probable cause to investigate something as a hate crime. Nielsen – There is something happening at schools to promote tolerance or GLBT families that ATAH might research.

Assessment and Awareness – Member Nielsen reported this workgroup is working with the Dental Board at the College of Alameda on the dental access issues for low income Alamedans. Risk management has given a thumbs up, they will begin drafting a business plan, and including the agencies that serve Alameda in the process. Franz – Service Collaborative email was sent out. The trolley for the July 4th parade has been reserved.

Disability Commission wrote an urgent letter, appeal to us to appeal to Council to write letter to State urging health care issues. Wasko suggested the Disability Commission be engaged in conversation.

Family Services Workgroup – President Wasko stated there is nothing to report.

Sister City Workgroup – Vice-President Chen reported that letters of invitation have been sent to China for the delegation. He further stated the time frame between them getting the letters and the delegation arriving is anticipated to be two months. The workgroup is attempting to verify the sister city status with Lindgo, but haven't had contact from Sweden. Another letter will be sent to Japan to verify their sister city status as well. Condolence letters have been requested from the Mayor's office and sent to China to offer support after the recent earthquake.

June 2nd, 4-6:pm Lena Tam and Barbara Lee will be at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center China tour.

4. BOARD / STAFF COMMUNICATIONS: Franz mentioned the upcoming Heroes Breakfast and the deadline for entries being June 3rd, the breakfast will be June 26th.

5. ORAL COMMUNICATIONS: None

6. ADJOURNMENT: Member Franz adjourned the meeting at 9:00 p.m., second Villareal.

Respectfully submitted,

Melissa Jones
Secretary, Social Services Human Relations Board

MJ:sb